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Southeast Missouri:
A Laboratory for the Cotton South

Seven counties in Southeast Missouri have become a laboratory, which may produce an answer for one of the South's toughest problems—what to do about the landless sharecropper and farm laborer.

Although they are in a Midwest area, these seven counties—the "boot-heel" of Missouri—belong economically to the South. Cotton is the chief cash crop, and most of it is produced by tenants or sharecroppers working land that belongs to somebody else.

Today farming in Southeast Missouri is rapidly being mechanized. Machines are doing much of the work which was done by laborers until a year or two ago. Many plantations are no longer worked by sharecroppers. They operate on a factory basis, employing only a few tractor drivers for most of the year, but depending on large numbers of day laborers for a few months in cotton-chopping and picking seasons. This kind of farming leaves a big surplus population in other seasons, which either must depend on local relief or must migrate somewhere else in search of work. In either case, a serious economic and social problem results.

What is happening in Southeast Missouri also is taking place—somewhat more gradually—throughout much of the South. The troubles Southeast Missouri faces today will confront hundreds of Southern communities tomorrow. If a set of remedies for these troubles can be found in Southeast Missouri, the same measures may go far to solve the problems of a much larger area. For that reason, many far-sighted Southern farm leaders are paying increasing attention to the events which are taking place today in the seven "boot-heel" counties of Missouri.

The history of Southern agriculture for the last 150 years has been repeated in Southeastern Missouri within the span of a single generation. About 30 years ago, most of this country was forest-covered swamp. It was reclaimed from the overflow of the Mississippi; its timber was lumbered off; the rich black soil, deposited by floods over the course of centuries, was planted to corn and wheat. When the demand for wheat dwindled after the first World War, most of the land went into cotton.

Many new settlers swarmed into this new farming country, as the over-worked cotton lands of the old South wore out. Even in the last ten years, these Missouri counties—Dunklin, Pemiscot, Mississippi, New Madrid, Butler, Stoddard, and Scott—have gained from 20 to 50 percent in population.

Under a system of family-type farms, there might have been enough land for all. But cotton plantations were the rule in the

"boot-heel," and when their efficiency was challenged by sagging cotton prices, many were converted into farm factories. The trend was speeded up by retirement of cotton land by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and the profits to be made in ginning. Owners of gins bought up or leased more and more land in order to supply their gins. The size of farms increased, while the number of farms decreased. Between 1926 and 1936, 64 percent of the sharecroppers in Southeast Missouri had left off cropping; more than half became farm laborers.

Sharecroppers Pushed Off The Land

The demands of modern large-scale mechanized farming meant the death of the traditional plantation system. "Moving-day" for the sharecropper no longer means a change from one farm to another in search of a better living. "Moving-day" is a scramble to find a piece of land on which to make a crop. For every farm owner in the Missouri cotton counties, there are now at least four tenants or sharecroppers; and in Mississippi and New Madrid counties where level lands favor machine operations, there are nine tenants or sharecroppers for every farm owner.

Under the old plantation system, the tenants and sharecroppers got shelter in some kind of cabin and eight months of "furnish." They got food and clothing on credit during the winter months, and paid off out of their share of the crop at harvest time.

Most of these former sharecroppers are now day laborers. They get \$1 a day for chopping cotton; 65 cents to 80 cents for picking 100 pounds of cotton. Work is to be had only a few months of the year. They no longer have homes on the land, not even a sharecropper's shack. There is no "furnish" to tide them over the slack winter months; most have to fall back on public relief or take to the road. Recently it was found that 60 percent of the migrants in Berrien county, Michigan, a center for cherry pickers, had come from in or near Southeast Missouri. Missouri now ranks third, after Oklahoma and Arkansas, in the number of displaced sharecroppers and tenants being pushed into the stream of westward migration.

Most landlords feel that the use of day laborers is a necessary economy. A glutted cotton market has forced many of them to replace sharecroppers with machines. Many of the planters frankly admit that in order to cut labor costs, they have been forced in their own interests to "demote a class which already is one of the least privileged in the land."

Subsidies

Labor is subsidizing the costs of the growers in several ways. First, the difference between a sharecropper's income and that of an ex-sharecropper re-employed as a wage hand goes into the landlord's pocket.

Second, most planters take little responsibility for the support of their day laborers. Housing is rarely provided. The pay which day laborers get during their few weeks of work is barely a living wage; and the Government has to support most of these people on relief for the rest of the year. Growers thus receive a subsidy in the form of cheap labor, largely supported by the public.

Another type of labor subsidy has been received by some growers who have had their land cleared at the expense of the small operator. A speculator or large landowner will buy a big tract of uncleared land for \$5 to \$15 an acre, then resell it to small farmers at a much higher price. The farmer who tries to clear the land and at the same time make a crop, usually is not able to meet payments on the mortgage at the end of the year. He is foreclosed and another small farmer takes his place, does more clearing, and is in turn foreclosed. By the time the land is finally cleared, three or four families have been foreclosed and the operator can then sell the land at a large profit.

Intensive speculation in land leaves little room for the small operator. Usually five hundred and 1,000-acre tracts are sold in blocks which the small operator cannot afford to buy. Often, the tenant does not know how long he may be on the farm, because leases usually provide for eviction in case of resale or transfer of the land.

The 1939 Demonstration

Such was the general situation in the fall of 1939 when about 70 plantation owners decided to change from the sharecropping system to day labor. When the 'cropper families received their notices to move in January, several hundred of them took their meagre belongings and "demonstrated" along two U. S. highways. For several days they camped on the narrow strip of public land beside the road, hungry and shivering in the snow and cold. They maintained they had received eviction notices and could not find any other farms where they could settle down again and make a crop. Reverend Owen Whitfield, who led the demonstration, wrote at the time: "These courageous evicted sharecroppers decided to just walk along the highway until 'I starve out and die.'" And people going North and South saw them. People going East and West stopped to ask about them. Newspapermen came out and talked with them, and photographers flashed bulbs in their

faces as they slept." This demonstration drew national attention to the problem of these landless people.

The demonstration ended when the families were moved into designated camps on uncleared land, were taken back on farms in a few instances, or went elsewhere to try to find work. But the factors that had created the demonstration were still at work.

The Search for a Remedy

To avert another critical situation, a year later in 1940, Governor Lloyd C. Stark appointed a special committee to work out some plan for the seven counties. The committee included landowners, workers, and representatives of State and Federal agencies, including the Farm Security Administration.

While FSA workers studied the problems of the area, the Missouri Employment Service held a registration of farm families who had no place to go in 1940. Although continuous rains had made many roads impassable, more than 900 families registered. It was estimated that at least a thousand homes would be needed to house all of the displaced tenants and sharecroppers.

Meanwhile, the FSA's studies, concentrated in four of the counties, showed that there was work for all the population in the area at least four months each year during the cotton-chopping and picking seasons. On the farms in the four counties, 5,000 workers could take care of all the work during slack months, but the need for workers grew to more than 30,000 in the chopping season and more than 35,000 during the picking season.

Many sharecroppers and tenants demanded more projects like La Forge Farms to solve their difficulties. La Forge is an experiment to determine whether a family-type farm can support a typical sharecropper family on a decent standard of living. Three years before, the Farm Security Administration had purchased 6,700 acres in New Madrid County, and had helped the 100 sharecropper families already living on the land to get a new start in a different kind of farming.

Four and five-room houses, costing \$1,300 and less, were built for each family. A loan, averaging about \$1,300, was made to each family for the purchase of livestock, machinery, feed, and seed. These loans are being repaid over a five-year period at five percent interest.

Under the supervision of trained farm and home supervisors, the 100 families reduced their total cotton acreage, increased the acreage

in hay and legumes from 200 to 2,000 acres. Still, the total cotton crop in 1938 brought approximately \$56,000 to the small growers. By the end of the second year, the women had canned more than 50,000 quarts of fruits and vegetables for home consumption and each family had an adequate meat supply.

Families who began the experiment with possessions worth an average of only \$28 had an average gross worth of \$1,400 in 1940. Each family averaged \$377 in surplus cash to begin the year 1940, over and above all expenses, including rent, loan repayments, and all operating costs.

Although repayments are on schedule at this project and there is every prospect that the Government's entire investment will be repaid with interest in a relatively short period, a similar solution could not be put into effect for the thousands of dislocated sharecroppers in the "boot-heel" because of lack of funds.

Landowners, tenants, and Government agencies finally compromised on a plan to give farm laborers and sharecroppers a chance to make a subsistence living under better health and housing conditions, and to stabilize the labor supply within the area.

Five main lines of attack were agreed upon. These could be flexibly adapted to meet varying needs—from those of the small farm owner in danger of losing his land to that of the displaced sharecropper, who had nothing left but a few blankets and a swarm of children. The five parts of the plan are: (1) a labor rehabilitation program; (2) scattered labor homes; (3) group labor homes; (4) lease and purchase associations; and (5) rehabilitation loans for small farm owners.

Labor Rehabilitation Program

This is mainly a constructive relief device to enable farm labor families to raise a subsistence living in the slack seasons, and at the same time, to be available as a stable labor supply during the cotton-chopping and picking seasons.

Under this program, the Farm Security Administration accepted responsibility for 1,540 families, all certified by the Missouri State Social Security staff as on relief or eligible for relief. Landlords cooperated by giving these families empty tenant houses, garden tracts, and cow pastures rent free. The Farm Security Administration then made grants to these families, averaging about \$40, to buy garden seed, tools, canning equipment, and other things needed to produce their own food supply. About 90 percent of the families also obtained loans, averaging about \$70 each, to buy cows. The cows not only will provide

the families with milk and butter, but also will bring in a small cash income for repayment of the loans. In return for the grants, families agreed to build food storage cellars, fix privies and wells, and improve their homes.

A few landlords at first argued that this plan was foolish, asserting that the sharecroppers would not grow gardens. Lately, these same landlords have asked FSA county supervisors, "How do you do it? I want you to help teach my workers and croppers to raise gardens. I'll give them the land, if they will use it."

The change in the landlords' attitude is explained by the report of a recent visitor to the area: "I visited several of these families. In every instance, I found a well-tended garden which included corn, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, lettuce, carrots, and beans. The husband was either working in the garden or chopping cotton. The wife was generally canning with a pressure cooker. The storage cellars were built and from 50 to 100 quarts were already stored. They were proud of their garden, pigs, and cows, and kept them well."

This pattern of "live-at-home" production of food is new to the sharecroppers and farm workers now living on privately-owned land, but they are learning fast. Many of the labor rehabilitation families, asked to preserve at least 80 quarts of food per person, are instead canning 100 quarts of food besides storing potatoes and dried foods. At the end of the canning season, these families had canned 613,000 quarts of food, or an average of 81.2 per person. This exceeded the 80-quart quota set for each person.

Scattered Labor Homes

Homes are now being built for 337 cropper families on sites donated rent free for ten years by cooperating landlords. These homes cost \$500 each; economy is achieved through combining the living room and kitchen, eliminating closets and sink, facing partitions on one side only, and reducing the total floor area to 420 square feet.

This three-room house with its small front stoop is not intended as a model, but it offers sharecropper families a weather-proof screened house, and is an improvement over the leaky, ramshackle cabins in which they formerly lived.

The building of these homes on private land has been made possible through landlord cooperation in the following ways:

1. A landlord may lease the laborer three acres rent free for ten years and contribute \$350 toward the construction of the cottage.

The farm laborer contributes \$150, advanced by FSA to the cost of the house, which is built by the landlord according to FSA specifications. At the end of ten years, the cottage and land go back to the landlord.

2. Under another arrangement, the landlord leases the laborer ten acres of cut-over land rent free for ten years and the laborer repays the entire FSA advance on the cottage. At the end of ten years, the landlord gets the house and the cleared land.

3. Finally, the landlord may furnish the laborer, rent free for a ten-year period, three acres for the home site and garden plus two cotton acres, or four cotton acres on a sharecrop basis. In this case, the farm laborer receives a loan for \$350 for the construction of the house. His income from the cotton acres is expected to pay off his FSA loan over a ten-year period. At the end of that time, the house reverts to the landlord.

To each of these families, the Farm Security Administration makes a small loan for the purchase of a cow, and grants them money to buy garden seed, tools, canning equipment, and material to construct a sanitary privy and a cow barn.

By October, one of the women helped through this program had won the prize at the Mississippi County fair for her canning exhibit of more than 75 varieties of canned vegetables, fruits, and meats. She used a pressure cooker for the first time, when she moved into her cottage late in July.

Group Labor Homes

For those families who cannot get a lease on private land, the Farm Security Administration is developing 502 workers' homes on 1,512 acres bought by the Government.

Construction is nearing completion on these homes, which are built in eight groups of 50 to 100 homes each. These houses cost about \$900. Each will have four rooms and a screened workporch, with a total floor space of 640 square feet. Of the 502 families to be accommodated, 175 are Negro.

Families living in these communities will have individual garden tracts of two acres each and the use of a common pasture. A live-at-home program is to be developed so that families will be able to make a subsistence living in off-seasons, and yet be available for peak labor demands. The rent of each home and garden tract is about \$4. a month.

Lease and Purchase Associations

Many low-income farm families on the rehabilitation program are forced off the land they are farming each year, as the landlords change

over to day labor operations. These families and others farming under unfavorable and uncertain leasing arrangements are being helped to join cooperative land purchasing groups.

These associations have been organized primarily to obtain land and security of tenure for small farm operators who could not otherwise get a farm. An association, with the help of a 40-year loan at 3 percent interest made by the Farm Security Administration, buys a large block of land and then sub-leases or sells family-type tracts to its members. The rent or annual purchase payments obtained from members of the association are used to pay off the FSA loan.

Under this program, 16,924 acres have been purchased, and 260 families will be settled in new houses and on full-time farms. Rehabilitation loans for stock, equipment, operating expenses, and subsistence will be made to the individuals in the six associations, and they also will get technical guidance in farm and home management from FSA specialists.

This is the only program so far that satisfies the land-hunger of the Missouri tenants and sharecroppers, and is the closest approximation to the La Forge Farms project.

To help as many distressed farmers as possible to get a secure foothold on the land, cooperative leasing associations have also been organized. This type of association usually leases a large tract for five years and then sub-leases family-type acreages to individual families. The land is rented for cash by the landlord who agrees to relocate dwellings on individual tracts and repair existing houses.

The Farm Security Administration makes a loan to the association to enable it to pay its first year's rent and have some reserve toward the second year's rent. Following the first year's operation, the association is solely responsible for payment of the land rental.

Individuals rent from the association for one-fourth share of the cotton and \$7.50 an acre annually for non-cotton acreage. Agricultural Adjustment Administration benefit payments are divided between the association and the participating families. As in the land-purchasing associations, families receive small FSA rehabilitation loans and guidance in farm and home management.

Security for Small Farmers

To stabilize small farmers in danger of losing their status as owners or tenants, the Farm Security Administration has expanded its ordinary rehabilitation program in this area. In addition, special real estate loans of less than \$1,000 are made to small owners in newly-cleared areas to refinance their equity in the land.

Sixty-five distressed small farmers have already been saved from foreclosure through these special real estate loans. Down in Pemiscot county on the Arkansas border, 20 families out of 40 who started toward ownership a few years back have been enabled to save their land by these new loans. The other 20, fighting to clear their backwoods land fast enough to preserve their economic independence, lost the fight when they became over-indebted to furnish merchants. Those saved by FSA loans are already getting back on their feet.

Southeast Missouri is now going through a trial-and-error period. If these experiments fail, it will mean other methods will have to be developed to avert a critical situation in the South. If they prove successful, sorely-needed solutions for the South's problem of surplus farm people will be at hand.

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